

A Dominant Fact in the Southern Situation.

We know of nothing in connection with the new condition of the South so significant as the desire of the freedmen to learn to read and write, and the quickness with which they obtain this power. There can be no mistake about this, for it is the universal testimony of all the teachers sent out by the Freedmen's Association, and is abundantly confirmed by the reports of our military officers. It is a tremendous fact. If it continues unchanged, one of two things is inevitable: either the poor white masses must acquire new impulses and aims, or the black races must become the controlling power of the South. We may shrink from this alternative, but there is no quarreling with it; it is as inexorable as fate.

The majority of the poor whites of the South cannot read or write, and have no wish to learn. They are utterly without ambition, utterly without the disposition to make any effort to secure a better lot for themselves and their children. They have been content, for generations, to remain ignorant. They do not even understand that ignorance is a misfortune. We have not yet heard of the first indication of a feeling among them that they ought to have instruction which would prepare them for the new situation brought on by the extinction of slavery. We have watched in vain for the faintest breath of an aspiration among them to get the benefit, in the reconstruction of the Slave States, of a public system of instruction like that in the North. They seem, since the rebellion, to have relapsed into greater indifference than ever.

It seems singular that there should be such a difference between the liberated blacks and the poor whites in respect to their readiness to qualify themselves for the new situation. One would naturally say that slavery would have so stupefied and brutefied the blacks that they would be absolutely unable to appreciate the advantages of education, and would be perfectly satisfied with a freedom that would give them plenty to eat and little to do. The poor whites, on the other hand, we should suppose, would quickly understand that nothing but their own mental elevation can keep them above the blacks, now that slavery no longer exists to press the blacks under. The sudden gain of freedom has given the black men a stimulus unfelt by the poor white man of the South, though he has always possessed freedom. The truth is that it is not literally correct to say that Southern slavery has been an unmitigated evil to the black man. With all of its oppression, it has yet imposed upon him habits of industry, and has preserved him from the worst vice of the white race—intemperance. His very sufferings have tended to make his heart peculiarly susceptible to religious sentiment, and to enliven all the higher elements of his being with the hope and faith of final deliverance. Religious hope and faith are always elevating forces, under whatever condition of things, however adverse—even slavery itself. No man will deny that the present generation of Southern blacks are far superior, mentally and morally, to their ancestors who were brought from Africa three or four generations ago. In spite of the fact that their bondage was constantly growing more severe, there was a constantly increasing intelligence, mental and moral. No restrictions could prevent this. It went on at the time when the poor whites were remaining stationary, or were positively degenerating. And now, when slavery is forever lifted from them, we find that they have an eagerness to advance, while no disposition of the kind is shown by the ignorant white class around them.

A Southern letter makes mention of the circumstance that, "a few days since, of 170 white men laboring on public works, but three could sign their names, while of 140 blacks, laboring at the same time and place, 92 could sign their names." Can any sane man believe that any such ratio could become a general fact throughout the South, without its resulting in a positive ascendancy of the blacks? Knowledge is power. Intelligence will always rule in any human society. No difference of race or color can prevent the operation of this social law. Nor can any constitutional regulation, or legislative enactment change the ultimate result. The blacks may for a time be kept out of the suffrage, but just as sure as they get the superior intelligence, just so sure must the suffrage, and every other political power, come into their hands.

It may be that an attempt will be made, when the Southern States completely regain their old powers, to frame legislation calculated to keep the freedmen in their old ignorance. It is even possible that the regulations of the Black Code may be revived, which made it a penal offence to give the black race instruction. But, if what is said of the anxiety of the freedmen to get instruction, is fully true, it would not be possible for any legal enactment to shut it away from them. It would be as idle as to try to deprive them of the light of heaven. The only means of keeping the freedmen from gaining upon the white race is by adopting the free school system of the Northern States, and arousing in the poor whites a new spirit that would prompt them to avail themselves of its facilities. It remains to be seen whether Southern legislators will have the wisdom and the energy to determine upon and carry out this policy, and thus give the poor white masses a fresh impulse, or whether they will content themselves with simply seeking to plant obstructions in the path of the freedmen. If they choose the former course, they may still preserve the ascendancy of the white race without doing any wrong to the other. If they adopt the latter course, they will fail in their purpose, besides disgracing themselves before the world.